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RUEKJCS/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 JEDDAH 000336

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/30/2016  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [SCUL](#) [SOCI](#) [SA](#)  
SUBJECT: GENETIC ILLNESSES ON THE RISE IN SAUDI ARABIA  
DESPITE PUBLIC AWARENESS EFFORTS

REF: A. JEDDAH 00300  
[1](#)B. JEDDAH 00329

Classified By: Consul General Tatiana C. Gfoeller for reasons 1.4 (b) a  
nd (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Anecdotal evidence from Consulate General  
Jeddah's contacts indicates that the rate of genetic illness  
among Saudi children is on the rise, primarily due to the  
persistence of consanguineous marriages in the country. This  
persistence may be attributed to Saudi parents' efforts to  
shield their children from the onslaught of modernization  
facing the Kingdom. Despite this, local business groups,  
health professionals, and governmental bodies are persisting  
in their efforts to raise public awareness of the issue and  
to break-down traditional Saudi taboos against discussing  
such problems. END SUMMARY

#### MODERN PRESSURES CAUSE REACTIONARY ATTITUDES

[1](#)2. (C) The Consul General's discussions with a variety of  
Consulate General contacts indicate that the rate of genetic  
illness among Saudi children is exponentially higher than in  
other parts of the world, primarily due to the persistent  
societal support for consanguineous marriages generation  
after generation. Contacts attribute this support to efforts  
to retain monetary resources within the same family and to a  
sense of genetic pride within a particular family-group or  
clan. However, in a uniquely Saudi twist, parents, concerned  
about the influence of modern attitudes on traditional Saudi  
culture and the increasing interaction between the sexes, may  
also be pushing their daughters to marry close relatives  
because they are a known quantity. With the advent of a  
somewhat relaxed social environment, particularly in the  
Western province, young men and women are increasingly able  
to meet each other at malls and via mobile phone text  
messaging.

[1](#)3. (C) Similarly, archaic approaches to the disabled have  
limited efforts to adequately address increases in the rate  
of disease. One local Amcit recently reported to the Consul  
General that, upon visiting a Jeddah clinic where her own ill  
son was living, she observed a Saudi mother whose ten  
disabled children were all institutionalized at the same  
facility. The Saudi woman, married to her first cousin,  
indicated that she would continue to perform her religious  
obligation of creating offspring, and if it was Allah's will

that they be sick, so be it.

¶4. (C) There are many other cases, however, of Saudi parents abandoning their disabled children. One Consulate contact recounted to the CG the story of a wealthy Jeddah couple who divorced immediately following the birth of their mentally disabled son, and after moving out of the city and both re-marrying other partners, maintained him in Jeddah, with a staff of five servants, for the next 17 years. Having never been visited by his parents (or, for that matter, leaving the home), the boy had never said a word. Finally, he was taken by one of the servants to the local Hope Center and later participated in a program designed to increase motor skills among the disabled through horseback riding (see reftels). He now knows the names of his teachers and the word "horse."

#### TENTATIVE STEPS TO INCREASE AWARENESS

¶5. (C) Confronting these entrenched social approaches to the disabled is no small task, though several local businessmen and health professionals have recently indicated to the CG that they are attempting to increase public awareness of the causes and the treatment for genetic illnesses. "This is topic A among young women," said one contact, a female medical doctor who specializes in genetic illnesses. She described a girl that had told her family she would rather remain un-married for life than wed her first cousin as they proposed for fear of having a disabled child as many of her friends in consanguineous marriages do. (NOTE: There is a strong social stigma attached to older, unmarried women, whose position in the society is therefore undermined).

¶6. (C) One local group of businessmen spent four years pushing the government to require blood tests in the application for marriage licenses, over the objection of the

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ulema (the religious establishment). Though successful, the measure was ultimately diluted to require the tests but still allow couples to decide whether or not to proceed regardless of the results. The Economic and Social Council, under the office of the Governor of Mecca, supported the requirement and is also active in promoting the awareness campaign. "Word is slowly getting out," said another local female doctor, who is pushing for awareness in this area.

¶7. (C) COMMENT: During her previous tour in the Kingdom in the late 1980s, the CG noted a similarly alarming number of mentally disabled children during visits to some of Riyadh's clinics. The situation appears to have changed little in the intervening years, despite the tentative steps to raise awareness of the consequences of consanguinity. END COMMENT  
Gfoeller